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RUEHQD/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 2381
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE PRIORITY 1083
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SUBJECT: PRESS FREEDOM UPDATE: BRV PRESSURE CONTINUES INTO
ELECTION SEASON

REF: A. CARACAS 2466
 B. CARACAS 2272 AND PREVIOUS
 C. CARACAS 1909

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SUMMARY

11. (U) This cable is an update on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela's (BRV) efforts to restrict freedom of press. As indicated in reftels, the BRV employs a variety of mechanisms - legal, economic, regulatory, judicial, and rhetorical - to harass the private media, inducing self-censorship and engendering a repressive, almost fascistic, attitude towards the free press. Topics addressed in this update include:

-Ortega jailbreak's impact on the press;
-Lara newspaper facing state-sponsored aggression;
-Border security, BRV-style: attack journalists;
-Trials and tribulations of Miguel Salazar continue;
-Overseas Press Club of America sends letter to Chavez condemning press record; and
-Press regains access to the Palacio de Justicia.

END SUMMARY

ORTEGA ESCAPE'S IMPACT ON A FREE PRESS

12. (U) Globovision reported August 15 that independent journalists were denied access to penal installations at Ramo Verde, the military prison from which political prisoners Carlos Ortega and the Faria family reportedly escaped on August 13. The escape story (ref a) received prominent play in all media outlets. According to Globovision, only official government media outlets have been given access

inside the facility. Globovision further reports that on August 17, several of their journalists were detained while covering the processing of the fourteen military officials charged with involvement in the escape.

¶3. (SBU) Before conducting a full investigation, the BRV directly accused opposition media of complicity in the Ortega prison escape. Minister of Interior and Justice Jesse Chacon said August 16 that there were indications that Globovision employee Edith Ruiz knew beforehand of the planned escape, leaving the path open for yet another legal action against a media personality. Ruiz, Manager for Institutional Relations at Globovision, informed PAS staff on August 14 that she is concerned for her safety as a result of the BRV's attempts to involve her in the escape.

¶4. (U) Piggybacking on Chacon's comments, the government organization Journalists for the Truth (Periodistas por la Verdad de Venezuela) also accused Globovision of involvement in the escape. This organization's director, Marcos Hernandez, expressed his conviction that Globovision had advance knowledge of the escape, due to its detailed coverage of the story. Hernandez points to the network's coordinated approach to the story, including interviews with the escapees' attorneys and family members, as evidence of advance knowledge of the plot.

¶5. (U) Attorney General Isaias Rodriguez announced August 17 that the Public Ministry would open an investigation against "all persons who have shown solidarity or support" for the Ortega/Faria escape. Rodriguez insinuated that such individuals could be held accountable for speaking in defense of persons whose actions may threaten public safety. He emphasized that both individuals and media outlets would be subject to the investigation, opening yet another flimsy

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avenue for future media and political persecution.

PROTESTS AGAINST LARA NEWSPAPER

¶6. (U) The Interamerican Press Society (SIP) condemned August 8 threats and intimidation against daily "El Caroreno" (Lara state). The threats, supposedly orchestrated by municipal employees, were motivated by the critical editorial bent of the newspaper towards the local administration, charges SIP. On July 26, some 40 individuals, including municipal employees, forced their way into a radio interview, hurling invective at the newspaper's editor, the interviewee. Protesters then began burning issues of the newspaper and threatening to set fire to the building.

DISIP ATTACKS JOURNALISTS IN TACHIRA

¶7. (U) Three journalists working for regional newspaper "Diario Los Andes" were attacked July 25 while investigating a story on border security in Tachira state, according to an alert issued by the local NGO Institute for Press and Society. DISIP (intelligence) agents reportedly detained the journalists' vehicle after spotting the photographer taking pictures, demanding they turn over the camera. One of the journalists - a woman - was beaten by a DISIP agent attempting to pull her from the vehicle.

DELAYING THEINEVITABLE

¶8. (U) A Circuit Court judge August 11 issued an arrest warrant against Miguel Salazar, editor of the weekly "Las Verdades de Miguel." Salazar, already facing prosecution for aggravated slander, reportedly failed to appear before the

court, as ordered by the judge. Salazar is accused of slandering several high-ranking officials, including the former Secretary of the Presidency, the governor of Guarico state, and a National Assembly deputy and his political party. Salazar's attorneys called for the recusal of the judge, a tactic they have now used three times. This move, in conjunction with the month-long judicial recess, has led to the postponement of Salazar's trial until September.

CONDEMNATION FROM AFAR

¶9. (U) The Overseas Press Club of America (OPC) addressed a letter to President Chavez July 11, condemning Venezuela's repression of the freedom of expression. The letter highlights four incidents: a journalist accused of defamation and slander by the Minister of Infrastructure for reporting on the collapse of the viaduct to the airport (an issue that nearly every Caraqueño has bemoaned in the last several months); a conviction in Guarico state for criminal defamation of the governor (ref b); the baseless accusations against daily "El Correo del Caroni" of "waging state terrorism" (ref b); and the threatened review of broadcasting licenses for media outlets, from President Chavez and Minister of Communications and Information Willian Lara (ref c). The OPC delicately invites Chavez to "clear your own good name." Copies of the letter were also sent to Attorney General Rodriguez, Minister Lara, Ambassador Alvarez in Washington, Ambassador Toro in New York, Ambassador Brownfield and the Inter-American Press Association.

A PRESS FREEDOM VICTORY?

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¶10. (U) Supreme Court Magistrate Eladio Aponte announced August 15 the reopening of the press room at the Palacio de Justicia. The court's press room had been closed since November 2005, when ex-judge Belkys Cedeno cut the electricity during a dissenting judge's statement to journalists. Aponte issued a statement saying the Judiciary has nothing to hide and that this measure is a way of demonstrating that freedom of the press exists in the BRV.

COMMENT

¶11. (SBU) With presidential elections looming in December, Chavez can be expected to make new efforts to appear democratic, but will continue to rely on authoritarian tactics. Similarly, Chavez can be expected to trumpet Venezuela's supposed excellent climate for freedom of expression, while Chavista police, prosecutors, and judges continue to keep the free press on the run. Whomever the messenger, the strategy remains the same: silencing critics and scaring those who may dare to speak out.

WHITAKER